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Nov 11th, 12:00 AM

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Liu, Chuanlin; Zhang, Langchao; and McRoberts, Lisa Barona, "Symbolic Ingredient Branding to Promote Premier Locally Produced Material in Global Consumer Market: A Case of American Wild Alligator Leather" (2015). *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings*. 139.

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## Symbolic Ingredient Branding to Promote Premier Locally Produced Material in Global Consumer Market: A Case of American Wild Alligator Leather

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Keywords: Co-branding, Inbranding, Alligator, Sustainability

Co-branding is one of the most commonly used strategies to promote new brands and maximize the market potential of established brands (Keller, 1993; Rooney, 1995). Ingredient branding (InBranding) is a popular co-branding strategy involving host and ingredient brands to develop an ingredient branding offering (IBO). Such co-branding is a win-win strategy for both host and ingredient brands working together to expand markets (Norris, 1992).

Since the late 1980s, companies have started accepting the concept and practicing InBranding to make their offerings visible to final consumers, establish, and maintain competitive advantage (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2010). Branded ingredient creates added value for host brands' customers and consequently helps host brands differentiate themselves while facing an increasingly overcrowded market (Desai & Keller, 2002). InBranding makes the branded ingredient become the trigger for the buying decision in favor of the final consumer goods (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2010), and creating a loyal and profitable customer relationship for both the ingredient brand and host brand (Balachander & Ghose, 2003; Swaminathan, Reddy, & Dommer, 2012). However, all the successful InBranding cases focus on the functional features or attributes from either the ingredients or the final products offered by host brands.

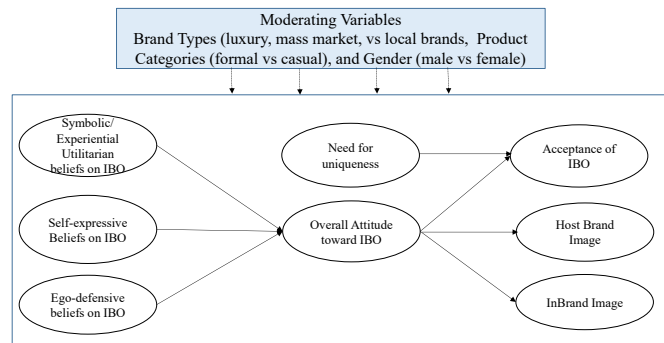
To our knowledge, there is no research that has explored the role of non-functional features from a component can play through InBranding to create added symbolic/experiential value to the final consumer goods, and to facilitate host brand to compete a share of consumer identity in the global market. In fact, fashion clothing has been considered as a means of non-verbal communication to deliver a message about the wearer's identity, social status, and lifestyle. This very competitive billion-dollar fashion industry is full of self-expressive brands in all segments, providing great opportunities for locally produced premier fashion and accessory components to establish its own brand identity through co-branding with different types of brands.

This exploratory conceptual study focuses on the premier fashion component, American wild alligator leather. For over a century, farm-raised perfect alligator skins have been used to make highly desired exotic leather products. Every year specific amounts of wild alligators must be hunted to maintain the ecological balance of the wetlands. The inventory of slightly flawed wild alligator skins has accumulated to a degree that has significantly affected the model of sustainable use of wildlife and ecologically balanced alligator economy. Promoting wild alligator skins turns to be an immediate task for preserving the natural habitat of the American alligators.

Drawing on extant brand literatures (e.g., Martínez Salinas & Pina Pérez, 2009; Mazodier & Merunka, 2014; Xu, Summers, & Belleau, 2004), a conceptual model which integrates research paradigms from brand equity, fashion design, development & marketing, and consumer shopping behavior was proposed. We proposed that perceived symbolic/experiential, self-

expressive, and ego-defensive values boost favorable attitudes toward Symbolic Ingredient Branding Offering (SIBO), which drives individuals' acceptance of SIBO, and increases favorable brand image for both host brand and Inbrand. In addition, need for uniqueness may play a role in acceptance of SIBO. Furthermore, brand types, fashion product categories, and gender may shape the proposed relationships, and consequently affect implementation of symbolic Inbranding strategies for different brands and market segments.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Symbolic Inbranding



The conceptual research model is proposed to facilitate further empirical studies with an attempt to answer the following research questions: (1) can co-branding with established luxury brands generate spillover effects on the American wild alligator leather to enhance positive brand image for both host brand and the Inbrand? (2) Can the American wild alligator leather be treated as an Inbrand

(i.e., branded ingredient) to help introduce luxury features into a host brand, and upgrade the image of the host brand and thus be a source of competitive advantage for the host brand? (3) Can American wild alligator leather function as premier Inbrand to be leveraged by local designer brands to establish the brands and enhance brand images?

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